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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ULAANBAATAR 000182

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STATE FOR EAP/CM, PRM, DRL AND INR/EAP

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TAGS: PREF SMIG PHUM PREL PGOV ECON EAID SOCI MG

SUBJECT: UNHCR REP: MONGOLIA WILL NOT/NOT FORCE REFUGEES
BACK TO CHINA

REF: ULAANBAATAR 0159 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Brian L. Goldbeck for Reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: UNHCR's Regional Rep for China and Mongolia, Veerapong Vongvarotai, visited the Embassy on April 24 and said UNHCR has appealed to the South Korean Government to reconsider its refusal to admit three North Korean refugees currently in Mongolia. Veerapong said it is "not possible" that Mongolian authorities would forcibly send the three back to China, where they lived for long periods after leaving North Korea. Veerapong said "very few" DPRK refugees are arriving in Mongolia, due to increased security in China. Veerapong was accompanied by UNHCR Country Rep Od Och, who estimated that Mongolia is currently home to around 180 DPRK refugees, held at four shelters. Construction is to begin soon on two 25-bed "reception shelters" in eastern Mongolia; they are to open by August. Veerapong said construction of a larger shelter, to be jointly run by Mongolia's General Intelligence Agency (GIA) and Border Force, will not resume before June 29 Parliamentary elections. He said the South Korean Government (ROKG) has committed \$50,000 to upgrade the Nalaikh shelter; ventilation and plumbing systems are to be improved, and the number of beds is to rise by 50%. Veerapong said DPRK arrivals in Thailand are increasing, and that the Government of Thailand, like the Government of Mongolia (GOM), is complaining about the slow pace of refugee processing. He said UNHCR is concerned that the "paranoid Chinese" might launch a crackdown on DPRK refugees during the Olympics; that an NGO has reported that the bounty for DPRK illegals in China had risen by some 60%; and that the GOM has "not kept (its) promise" to put on Parliament's spring-session agenda the issue of the UN Refugee Convention. Veerapong said he did not know of any discontent among DPRK refugees in Mongolia; apparently he was unaware of the shelter disturbance (reftel) in March, which left some guards slightly injured. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) UNHCR Regional Rep Veerapong and UNHCR Country Rep Och visited the Embassy April 24 and met for an hour with Econ/Pol Chief and Presidential Management Fellow. (Note: Hours later, Veerapong was scheduled to meet with Mongolia's Foreign and Justice Ministers, as well as officials of the

GIA, Border Force and Immigration. Post can confirm that Veerapong met briefly with Foreign Minister Oyun. End Note.)

Veerapong said UNHCR has appealed to the ROKG to reconsider its refusal of three DPRK refugees with protracted cases. He said all three spent long periods in China, legally, and have Chinese residency permits, but that they left China illegally. Because of their illegal departure, Veerapong said, if they were to return to China, the Chinese Government would no longer consider their residence permits valid. He added that all three had been members of the DPRK's Communist Party, but that he had underlined in communication with the ROKG the differences between passive and active membership.

"NOT POSSIBLE" MONGOLIA WILL FORCE REFUGEES BACK TO CHINA

¶3. (C) Some sources have told the Embassy (reftel) that Mongolian authorities might be willing to voluntarily allow DPRK refugees with unresolved cases to return to China. Another source claimed a few refugees might be involuntarily sent back to China, an assertion rejected by Mongolia's Foreign Ministry. Veerapong dismissed this possibility of involuntary repatriation out of hand. This is "not possible," he said. "The only way the Mongolian Government could do that is by taking them to the border and dropping them off in no-man's-land, but that's something Mongolia has never done." He added that one Chinese citizen of DPRK descent, who was rejected for resettlement by the ROKG, was allowed to voluntarily return to China in March. Veerapong explained that UNHCR had interviewed the woman before her departure and confirmed that she desired to return to China.

VERY FEW DPRK REFUGEES ARRIVING IN MONGOLIA

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¶4. (C) Veerapong said "very few" DPRK refugees are arriving in Mongolia, adding that UNHCR believes that the number is dropping due to "increased security on the Chinese side, not the Mongolian side" of the border. He said Chinese authorities are controlling transportation points more tightly. He added that Mongolian officials had told him that Mongolia lacks the capacity to vigorously strengthen the security of its borders.

UNHCR ESTIMATES NUMBER OF DPRK REFUGEES IN MONGOLIA AT 180

¶5. (C) Och said the UNHCR estimates that the total number of DPRK refugees in Mongolia is roughly 180, although the number of confirmed refugees is between 85 and 90. (The uncertainty stems from GIA's failure to consistently provide updated statistics, Och said.) Apart from a handful of refugees held at border posts immediately after crossing the frontier, most DPRK refugees are held at one of four shelters. One, run by the GIA, is the Yolan shelter, roughly 100 km NW of UB; the other three are operated by the Border Force. The biggest of these three is the Nalaikh shelter, located some 50 km east of the capital, Ulaanbaatar. The other Border Force shelters are in the eastern city of Choibalsan and the southeaster city of Zamyn Uud, along the Chinese border. Och said construction work will soon begin on two new, small shelters (also called "reception shelters") in the eastern towns of Erdenetsagaan and Sumber. They will have 25 beds apiece; Country Rep Och is to visit the sites in May. They are scheduled to open before August. The joint GIA/Border Force shelter, for which USG funds were provided, "is going nowhere because of political sensitivities," Veerapong said. He added, however, that he is confident that construction work on the joint shelter will resume after June's elections. He said the joint shelter will not be needed in the short term, due to the decline in recent DPRK arrivals.

ROK COMMITS TO UPGRADING NALAIKH SHELTER

¶6. (C) The UNHCR regional rep said the ROKG has responded positively to his call for a commitment to upgrade the facilities at the Nalaikh shelter. He said the ROKG has approved \$50,000 for this purpose, and said it is "better to do this work now, when there are fewer refugees." The upgrades will include increasing the number of beds from 80 to 120 and improving the ventilation and plumbing systems. A soccer pitch or badminton court might also be set up outside the structure, he added. If so, the walls around the compound will likely have to be raised, for security reasons, in order to limit outsiders' view of the refugees. Veerapong speculated that the upgrades will be completed this summer. (Note: We visited the Nalaikh shelter on February 5 and concluded that the refugees were being well treated. End Note.)

NGO: BOUNTY RAISED FOR DPRK ILLEGALS IN CHINA

¶7. (SBU/NF) Quoting a Japanese NGO that he did not identify by name, Veerapong said the bounty paid by Chinese authorities for a DPRK citizen living illegally in China has been raised by around 60%.

CONCERN OVER POTENTIAL CRACKDOWN DURING OLYMPICS

¶8. (C) Veerapong said UNHCR is worried that the "paranoid Chinese" might launch a crackdown on DPRK refugees during the Olympics. He said Beijing-based UNHCR staff had already noticed considerable activity by Chinese authorities to reinforce control over legal foreign residents. He said Thai diplomats in Beijing had been disturbed by authorities going door-to-door to check up on foreigners.

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TRAFFIC TO THAILAND INCREASING

¶9. (C) Veerapong said more DPRK refugees in China are heading to Thailand, though he did not provide statistics. He said most of those who successfully reach Thailand are not recent departures from the DPRK, but people who have lived for four or five years in China. He said many are earning, and saving, more money than before, and that this improved financial situation has enabled many to travel to China. Veerapong said the price of passage to Thailand has dropped as a result of greater competition among criminal organizations. Passage used to cost around 20,000 RMB per person, he said, but now runs from 13,000 to 15,000 RMB.

PROCESSING, MOVEMENT OF REFUGEES "VERY SLOW"

¶10. (C) Veerapong said the processing and movement of DPRK refugees from Mongolia to South Korea has been "very slow," and that the GOM has "continued to complain" to UNHCR and the ROKG about the slow processing time. He said the ROKG is also under pressure from the Government of Thailand to expedite cases. He added that there are more than 2,000 DPRK refugees in Thailand awaiting resettlement. Veerapong said the ROKG, for its part, says it is doing its best to expand the Hanowan integration facility, outside Seoul, and that it plans to complete the expansion project by year's end, doubling capacity from 4,000 to 8,000 refugees per year.

REFUGEE CONVENTION

¶11. (C) Veerapong said the GOM has "not kept (its) promise" to put on Parliament's spring-session agenda the issue of signing onto the UN Refugee Convention. "But at least the Ministries have reached a consensus" that Mongolia should accede to the Convention, he said. He said he expects the

issue to be included in the fall-session agenda. (Note: Mongolia's Parliament is currently seized with defining terms to conclude major mining investment agreements, a very contentious and politicized process, and MPs will then shift in May (or earlier) to campaigning for the June elections. End Note.)

UNHCR: NO DISGRUNTLED REFUGEES IN MONGOLIA

¶12. (C) Veerapong said he did not know of any discontented DPRK refugees in Mongolia, apart from those who are understandably impatient while awaiting resettlement. He was apparently unaware of the disturbance in late March at one refugee shelter in Mongolia. (Note: According to a GIA official, 70 or so DPRK refugees, some armed with knives, took part in that disturbance, which left some guards with slight injuries. End Note.)

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